

## **Communicating across barriers: 'Interoperability' project important for responders in Montana**

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Mention the word "interoperability" and you're likely to hear, "Inter-what?" But enter the word into your favorite search engine and you'll find references to computers, cell phones, health care information databases, gaming devices, even military weapons systems. Put simply, interoperability means allowing different forms of technology to share data or otherwise "talk" to one another.

For public safety and emergency service providers, interoperability has come to mean one thing: the ability to communicate across physical barriers, such as mountains, or across political boundary lines. It also means communicating over different radio technologies.

In the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, the Department of Homeland Security has made interoperable communications a priority for both urban and rural localities across the United States. In Montana, the Schweitzer administration - like the Martz administration before it - has envisioned an interoperable system that would serve every county in the state, as well as state agencies such as the Montana Highway Patrol.

What will interoperability provide? First and foremost, it will allow emergency responders to communicate with each other - and with their dispatchers - across more of the landscape. In many counties, IM is eliminating dead spots that have hindered communications for years. Local ambulances will have constant radio contact with dispatchers and hospitals during long-distance transports. Disaster responders can call in help more easily from the state or from adjacent counties.

Those kinds of local needs have largely defined the IM project. While other states have centralized the planning and supervision of interoperability systems in the state bureaucracy, Montana turned to counties and sovereign Indian nations. Those local governments banded together into "interoperability consortia," which have done much of the heavy lifting of this project. Their contributions, made primarily by people acting in volunteer capacities, cannot be overstated.

As a result, Montana has made more progress - for less money - than many other states. We've certainly had our challenges, but we also have avoided many of the issues that have cropped up in other places.

In 2005, the local consortia joined with the Montana Departments of Justice, Transportation and Natural Resources and Conservation to form Interoperability Montana, a nonprofit association that coordinates the construction of hilltop towers and the installation of high-tech communications equipment. IM also routes funding from government agencies to local projects.

In 2009, aided by the addition of a small band of full-time professional staff, the hard work of IM volunteer leaders yielded concrete (and steel) results:

- The "Northern Tier Project" is making interoperable communications possible across Montana's high line from Libby to Plentywood. That system also is linked to an existing interoperable system in Lewis and Clark County.

- IM and the U.S. Air Force formed a "win-win" partnership that has enhanced communications between Malmstrom Air Base and its missile fields in central Montana. The same infrastructure also connects counties from Harlowton to Conrad.

- We upgraded equipment that serves the Montana Highway Patrol along Interstates 15 and 90 in southwestern Montana. That work will provide more capacity for Montana Highway Patrol and local governments.

- IM has installed new infrastructure near Townsend, Whitehall, Dillon, Billings and Big Timber, among other places. In 2010, we'll continue that work and expand our work to include projects in eastern Montana.

Even as we're building, we're preparing to maintain the network once it's complete. We've received valuable input from local government leaders and public safety service providers. Their ideas will help us craft a plan that will balance services with available funding. (By the way, their comments can be viewed on our Web site - [www.interop.mt.gov](http://www.interop.mt.gov) - along with a wealth of other information about the project.)

IM still has more work to do - and more funding to secure - before interoperable communications are available in all of Montana's 56 counties. Our goal remains constant, however: to improve public safety by providing emergency responders with another communications tool that allows them to talk to the people they need to reach, anywhere, anytime.

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